

Can we say farewell to the Yahwist for good?

Peter Lockwood

Following parish ministry in Melbourne and Albury and doctoral studies at Luther Seminary in St Paul, Minnesota, with a thesis titled 'Guile and grace: the significance of Genesis 32–34 for the literary and theological coherence of the Jacob cycle', Lockwood has been teaching Old Testament studies at Luther Seminary, Adelaide, now Australian Lutheran College, since 1992. He serves as LTJ editor.

Introduction

A major revolution in biblical scholarship during the nineteen seventies has largely undermined the main pillars of the documentary hypothesis. The notion that the Pentateuch arose from four independent but parallel documents—the Yahwist (J), the Elohist (E), the Deuteronomist (D) and the Priestly source (P)—had held sway in scholarly circles for the past 100 years. The hypothesis had become such an article of faith that few dared to challenge it; those who did were confronting the scholarly establishment.¹ But it wasn't long before the questions that were being raised were too insistent to be ignored.

In its early days literary criticism² was driven by the desire to trace the development of religious thinking within Israel. It was assumed that each Pentateuchal source belonged to a different stage in the growth of the religion of Israel. Therefore the sources had to be clearly demarcated and then located within a specific time-frame within Israel's history. These tasks served the larger purpose of tracing the development of the religion of ancient Israel. As Wellhausen put it:

Criticism has not done its work when it has completed the mechanical distribution of the materials to their sources. It must aim further at bringing the different writings when thus arranged into relation with each other, must seek to render them intelligible as phases of a living process, and thus to make it possible to trace a graduated development of the tradition. (*Prolegomena*: 295)

Midway through the twentieth century a renewed concern to identify the distinctive theological message of each source and ascertain how that message applied to a specific crisis in the life of Israel at the time of writing had the effect of extending the day in the sun enjoyed by the documentary hypothesis. The 'Biblical Theology' movement,

¹ Hans Walter Wolff, for example, was critical of those who he said 'slew the Elohist with the stroke of a pen' (Rendtorff 1993: 214).

² More accurately defined as source criticism, to avoid confusion with the newer literary criticism which is interested in the literary features of the canonical text.

especially prominent in Germany, sought to correct what was regarded as an over emphasis on historical considerations at the expense of the theology of the text. 'Biblical Theology' gave rise to a wave of scholars in the sixties and seventies who were intent on asking: what did the God of Israel have to say to Israel by way of challenge and promise, given Israel's socio-political, cultural and religious circumstances at that moment in its history?³ Each source was said to represent a lively reworking of Israel's ancient traditions so that God could be heard speaking clearly and pointedly to the issues of the day.

This paper describes the documentary hypothesis at what may be regarded as its kerygmatic best, summarises the major criticisms the hypothesis has attracted, outlines some of the chief directions that research into Pentateuchal origins has taken during the past 40 years in view of the perceived flaws in the hypothesis, and then offers an evaluation of the documentary hypothesis and the latest developments.

The four kerygmatic sources: J,E,D and P

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the documentary hypothesis was the chief means of accounting for various features of the first five books of the Bible.⁴ These features included the use of two names for God (Elohim and Yahweh), the repetition of details within stories and even the repetition of whole stories, factual contradictions, different theological perspectives, disjointedness, stylistic variations and the use of different words for the same entity.⁵ The hypothesis proposes that four separate documents, composed at different periods, were edited together into a continuous narrative of Israel's national history that extended back to the creation of the world and culminated in the occupation of Canaan.

The redactional (editorial) activity occurred on three different occasions. The first of these, following the fall of Samaria in 722 BC, threaded together the southern J (Yahwist)

³ 'Kerygmatic exegesis', as this approach was called, from the Greek word *kērygma* (proclamation), is well represented in *The vitality of Old Testament traditions* (1975,1982), a collection of essays by Hans Walter Wolff and Walter Brueggemann that gives a clear picture of the documentary hypothesis at the time of its full flowering.

⁴ The chief alternative accounts of the origin and formation of the Pentateuch in view of its problematical features were the supplementary hypothesis and the fragmentary hypothesis.

⁵ Lists of repetitions usually include the two creation accounts (Gen 1 and 2), the accounts of a patriarch passing off his wife as his sister (Gen 12, 20 and 26), Hagar's expulsion from the family home by Sarah (Gen 16 and 21), and the complaints of the Israelites in the wilderness (Exod 14, 16 and 17 and Num 11, 16 and 20). Examples of two words that are used for the same entity include *shipchāh/āmāh* for maidservant, Amorites/Canaanites for the original inhabitants of the promised land, and Reu'el/Jethro for Moses' father-in-law. And the search for factual contradictions was never found to be particularly arduous. Did God create the world in six days (Gen 1:31) or one day (2:4b)? Did the creation of living creatures culminate in the creation of men and women (1:26–28), or were the non-human species created after the man was formed but as a prelude to the construction of the woman (2:7–23)? Did Noah take two of every kind of living thing into the ark (6:19,20), or two pairs of unclean animals but seven pairs of clean animals (7:2,3)?

source and the northern E (Elohist) source to create a unified document (R^{JE}).⁶ The D source, the laws of Deuteronomy, was said to have arisen not long before Josiah's reform of Israel's worship life in about 621 BC and provided the basis for that reform. During the exile another editor, or editorial team, expanded D into the form known to this day as Deuteronomy, and combined it with R^{JE} to form R^D. The third and final redaction of the Pentateuch took place during or immediately after the Babylonian exile. Steeped in the theology and worship practices of the Jerusalem temple, a priestly writer or group of writers (P), in view of the experience of exile, put the finishing touches to their long established body of cultic and priestly legislation and set it within an existing priestly narrative of Israel's story, prefaced by the P creation account (Gen 1:1 – 2:4a). A member—or members—of this priestly circle, eager to preserve the official material of the tradition (JED, now R^D), provided the framework for the Pentateuch with its genealogies and chronological notices, inserted P's characteristic legal sections, and added some final editorial touches in the form of theological summaries and evaluative comments in keeping with the priestly theology of the Jerusalem priesthood.

The Yahwist

Source criticism finally settled on the 'Solomonic Enlightenment' in the tenth century BC as the era in which the J source was composed.⁷ The age of Solomon marked a significant new phase in Israel's history. The promises of land made to the patriarchs appeared to have been fulfilled in the territory Israel occupied, the nation's borders had been secured, the 'great name' promised to Abraham and his seed had been realised in Nathan's oracle to David on his accession to the throne (2 Sam 7:9), and Israel was enjoying the confident ease of a nation making its way on the stage of world affairs.

With material prosperity comes spiritual complacency. With political security comes false confidence in unconditional divine approval. The Yahwist observes a nation enjoying freedom without practising responsibility. In this situation of spiritual crisis, J wants to show that Israel's election as God's covenant people implies an important task vis-à-vis the nations of the world.⁸ Therefore the promises of land and offspring take a back seat to God's ultimate purpose in making Abraham's name great, namely that through him and his seed 'all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Gen 12:3). Therefore J is at pains to show Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Moses bringing blessing in its various forms to those with whom they deal: through generous land sharing (Gen 12:8–12), intercessory prayer for forgiveness (18:22–33), covenants of peace with would-be aggressors (26:26–31; 31:51–55), and the blessings of livestock (30:27) and grain (39:5; 41:49,57).

⁶ R^{JE} stands for the redaction, or editorial reworking, of the J and E sources into a new document.

⁷ Wellhausen had placed J in the eighth century. Gerhard von Rad and his successor in Heidelberg Hans Walter Wolff proposed the tenth century. J is derived from the first letter of Jahweh (German; English: Yahweh), the divine name associated with the document. The document's territorial centre is Jerusalem and the southern tribe (not yet the southern kingdom) of Judah. Therefore J can also represent Judah (the son of Jacob and the southern tribe), and Jerusalem.

⁸ The so-called Succession Document of 2 Samuel 9–20 and 1 Kings 1–2 has been regarded as addressing the same crisis.

On several occasions, however, the patriarchs bring harm and danger to others, according to J. Abraham lies about his relationship with Sarah, a betrayal of trust that leads to an outbreak of plagues in Pharaoh's household (12:10–20). Abraham fails to protect the expectant Hagar from Sarah's revenge, leading to untold cruelty to the Egyptian maidservant, mother of Abraham's first-born son Ishmael (16:6; 21:9–11,14). And Jacob enriches himself at Laban's expense (31:1,2). The patriarchs are not portrayed as exemplary paragons, but as seriously flawed. Their clay feet are said to help the readers—Israel in the age of Solomon—identify with their forebears in the faith, as people richly and unconditionally blessed, sometimes capable of bringing the blessing to bear on the lives of others, but more often than not far too indifferent to God's claim on their lives. So J calls on them to shake off their lethargy and appreciate anew the international responsibility that their blessing entails. In other words, Israel's political and military power and its economic security during the Solomonic age should not replace confidence in the Lord God who has graciously bestowed such blessings and calls on his people to employ them responsibly in the wider world.⁹ Therein lies J's kerygmatic thrust.¹⁰

The Elohist

For E, it is no longer a case of achieving that perennially elusive balance between worldly power and spiritual and moral responsibility. That was J. Instead, in the face of life-threatening trials, the Elohist calls on Israel to trust in God's promises unflinchingly and fear him to the exclusion of all rival claims to their allegiance. Therefore the Elohist fragments¹¹ are those where the characters display outstanding courage when tempted to apostasise. They remain loyal no matter what the cost. Whereas the Yahwist may provide at least some initial comfort in showing readers that their own frailty is reflected in the frailty of the patriarchs ('You are like the patriarchs'), the Elohist challenges readers to aspire to the exemplary standards set by the patriarchs: 'Be like the patriarchs!' A clear example is the E version of Sarah's entry into the harem of a foreign king (20:1–18). In the parallel J stories the patriarchs tell a cowardly lie to save their skin—Abraham in Genesis 12, and Isaac in Genesis 26. The Elohist, on the other hand, exonerates Abraham by having him say that Sarah is his half-sister (20:12), thereby expunging the patriarchal duplicity of chapters 12 and 26.

The key terms for the Elohist are 'to test' and 'the fear of God', found at decisive points throughout Genesis and Exodus. The parade example is Abraham's binding of Isaac (Gen 22:1–19). When Abraham shows he is willing to accede to the command to offer up

⁹ To put it simply, J tells us: 'You are like Abraham, or Isaac, or Jacob, or Judah, a curious mixture of good and bad, richly blessed, failing repeatedly, but challenged to see with new eyes the world-wide implications of your divine election'. Somewhat anachronistically, maybe the Yahwist could be regarded as the Lutheran theologian of the Pentateuch, the Elohist as the Calvinist, and the priestly writer as the Catholic.

¹⁰ Wolff called it J's *Verkündigungswille*, or *Verkündigungsabsicht* (Brueggemann/Wolff 1982).

¹¹ Wolff says that successive redactions have whittled E down to such an extent that it can be spoken of only in terms of remaining fragments (Brueggemann/Wolff: 68).

his son Isaac in sacrifice and thereby passes the supreme test of obedience, God stays his hand with the words 'now I know that you fear God' (22:12). Another classic E text is the account of the Hebrew midwives' undaunted fear of God when the king of Egypt commands them to kill Hebrew boys on the birthing stool (Exod 1:15–21). Their fear of God results in a courageous act of civil disobedience even though, for all they knew, it may have cost them their lives.

What crisis in Israel's history would have called for such an appeal to the people's uncompromising allegiance? Wolff assigns E to the period of the northern prophets Elijah and Elisha in the mid ninth century BC, during the reign of Ahab and the decades that follow, or possibly Hosea and Amos a century later. Elijah's demand of the Israelites on Mt Carmel, that they cease 'limping with two different opinions' (1 Kgs 18:21), sounds remarkably similar to the Elohist's call for loyalty to God alone. The syncretism promoted by Ahab's Phoenician wife Jezebel had become a major stumbling block for Israel.

Reflected in this light, E becomes part of a far larger picture within the Old Testament story. During the prophetic ministry of Elijah and Elisha, and for some time after, the northern kingdom of Israel had succumbed to the enticing religious beliefs and practices of Canaan. Baal worship held out exciting promises of political and military power, pastoral and agricultural abundance, and unlimited economic gain. A thin veneer of Yahweh worship would keep the Lord on side, and ensure that the interests of the palace and the priesthood continued to be served. It was a deceptive path to take. Promising life, this entrenched syncretism resulted in nothing but death, for perpetrators and victims alike. Though the fear of the Lord excluded all other claims to allegiance and led by way of severe tests and trials, it was the only course that led to life in all its fullness, for the whole community. After all, it arose from the Lord's faithful promises and protective jealousy. Therein lies E's kerygmatic thrust.¹²

The D source

In the early years of the nineteenth century Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette made a decisive breakthrough in source critical studies, with his claim that 'the book of the law', found during temple renovations in the reign of King Josiah, was Deuteronomy 12–26 and served as the foundation for the religious reform movement of King Josiah in 621 BC (2 Kgs 22 and 23).¹³ With one Pentateuchal source finally assigned to a specific historical period, the late seventh century, the other sources could be dated by assessing their historical relationship to D.¹⁴ Source critics say that the D source (the legal codes of Deuteronomy 12–26) provided the beating heart of a far greater theological program, the Deuteronomistic History (DtrH). Steeped in D's theological convictions and legal

¹² It should be noted that Volz and Rudolph (1938) rejected the theory of a separate E source, mainly on the grounds that the name Yahweh occurred all too frequently in so-called E portions, and Elohim appeared all too often in J texts.

¹³ Blenkinsopp (1992:1–30) provides a clear and comprehensive description of the last two centuries of Pentateuchal scholarship, with a discussion of W M L de Wette at pages 5–7.

¹⁴ An extended treatment of the theology of D has been omitted due to space constraints.

traditions, an historian-cum-theologian drew on a vast array of sources to compile DtrH, consisting of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. This editorial hand has traditionally been referred to as the Deuteronomist (Dtr).

The P source

It has been traditional to posit that the Jerusalem priesthood gave the Pentateuch its finishing touches towards the end of the exile, or even in the years of Ezra's great reform of Israel's worship life immediately following the exile. The exile was Israel's darkest hour. Recent history had been marked by dispossession from the land, destruction of the temple, foreign domination, the end of the monarchy, and serious population decline. At a time when the promises of God to his people of old appeared to have been torn up, the P source provided the fresh appreciation of God's plans for his people that the exile demanded.

Brueggemann has proposed that P's creation account (Gen 1:1 – 2:4a) suggested Israel's imminent restoration to the land after the chaos and confusion of exile.¹⁵ In the beginning God created light and the firmament where previously there had been nothing but darkness and chaos; then the dry land emerged where previously there had been nothing but watery waste. Contemporary history is reflected in the ancient cosmogony. The creation of humans on the sixth day spoke of the day ahead when Israel would again enjoy rapid population growth. And the charge to have dominion over the other living creatures and subdue the earth looked forward to a future when Israel was no longer forced to kneel at the foot of the oppressor.

P held out hope for Israel, admittedly a future that was to be marked by meticulous observance of the legislation given to Moses on Mt Sinai in order to avoid a repeat of the exile. If God's holiness was not reflected in the holiness of his people, and by extension a holy land, it would once again become necessary to purify the land by means of a further exile. P's recurring kerygma, says Brueggemann, first appears at Genesis 1:28: 'God blessed them (humans created in God's image) and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth".' This would have rung out as good news in the ears of people in the midst of an earth-shattering social, political and theological crisis, a people alienated from land, monarchy and temple and everything else that had given them their sense of stability, security and identity. The characteristic genealogies of P would have played a similar role. Together with P's chronological notices they gave the Pentateuch its firm framework, thereby further serving to create in Israel a profound sense of their ancient origins and by implication offering promise of their open-ended future. Therein lies P's kerygmatic thrust.

¹⁵ In order to construct what he regards as the kerygma of the priestly writer, Brueggemann employs Wolff's methodology. He attempts to detect a recurring theological formulation that encapsulates a consistent and characteristic proclamation, before relating the kerygma to a specific crisis in the life of Israel (see Brueggemann and Wolff: 101).

History of traditions criticism

The form-critical work of Hermann Gunkel and his successors provided the impetus for a totally new development in the study of Pentateuchal origins. The focus of Gunkel's investigation was the smallest literary units, from which the four source documents were supposedly composed. The form-critical school claimed that the true literary gems of the Pentateuch were not the four documents identified by the literary critics but those that were formulated and handed down in various life settings (*Sitze im Leben*) within Israelite society, such as the cult, the lawcourt, the wisdom school, rural clan circles, or the household. The four documents were a crude later development.

The history of traditions movement, represented chiefly by Gerhard von Rad (1901–1971) and Martin Noth (1902–1968), appropriated Gunkel's findings in a revolutionary new approach to Pentateuchal research. In his ground-breaking essay, 'The form-critical problem of the Hexateuch' (1938), von Rad asked how the originally independent stories that arose in various settings in the life of ancient Israel finally came together in the form of the canonical Hexateuch.¹⁶ He was struck by what he regarded as small creeds, found in Deuteronomy 6 and 26 and Joshua 24, and by their focus on the exodus from Egypt and the settlement in the land. He imagined Israel reciting the creeds when its league of twelve tribes (Martin Noth's amphictyony) gathered each year during the time of the Judges for a putative covenant renewal ceremony. He concluded that the little creeds provided the basic framework around which Israel's grand narrative was subsequently constructed. Von Rad located in the Hexateuch's credal framework, with its focus on the Lord's mighty acts of salvation, the fundamental theological accent of Israel's epic story. It was first and foremost a story of deliverance and promise and hope, to which the covenant on Mt Sinai, the patriarchal narratives and the primeval stories of Genesis 1–11 were appended only at a later date. By the time of the monarchy the main contours of the Hexateuch had been completed; but during the reign of Solomon, a masterful theologian and historian whom von Rad dubbed the Yahwist drew on the ancient traditions at his disposal to all but complete the picture. It only remained for others to expand on J by way of slight supplementation (E) and final theological redaction (P).

The other great exponent of history of traditions criticism was Martin Noth, who claimed¹⁷ that during the period of the Judges Israel's ancient credal traditions coalesced into five separate blocks of literature: the exodus from Egypt, the settlement in Canaan, the patriarchal promises, the guidance of Israel in the wilderness, and the covenant at Mt Sinai. The independent units within each tradition block were held together by a clearly defined organising principle, different in each case. As for the patriarchal stories, for example, each cycle developed independently of the others: Abraham's in the Judean hill country around Hebron, Isaac's down south in the region of Beersheba, and Jacob's in

¹⁶ Von Rad invariably spoke of the Hexateuch, a work of six volumes. Yahweh's mighty deeds of salvation that are retold in the ancient creeds culminated in the settlement in Canaan, which is recorded in the book of Joshua, the sixth book of the Bible.

¹⁷ In his *Überlieferungsgeschichte des Pentateuch* (1948); English translation *A history of Pentateuchal traditions* (1972).

the northern districts of Bethel and Shechem. The glue that finally held the three cycles together consisted of God's promises, and a genealogy whereby Abraham became the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob. Prior to its entry into the land Israel never experienced a common history as twelve tribes united in covenant with Yahweh. The impression of such unity is created by combining and sequencing stories derived from different tribal groups in diverse locations. Prior to the formation of the state the five major tradition blocks were arranged into one major document that took the basic sequence and shape of the Pentateuch as we know it today. Still committed to the source theory, however, Noth then said that this foundational text (*Grundlage*, or 'G') provided the raw materials for the sources that were subsequently formulated, J in the tenth century (G slightly modified), E as a ninth century supplement, and P who gave what Noth called the Tetrateuch¹⁸ its final shape during the exile in the sixth century.

Concerns that have arisen

1. A rising tide of concerns about the historical, cultural and literary assumptions behind the documentary hypothesis has developed into a veritable tsunami. Early in the twentieth century questions were already being asked about the negative conclusions reached by source critics regarding the historicity of the patriarchal period and the exodus event. Concerned about the historical scepticism reflected in the work of the history of traditions exponents, the Albright school¹⁹ suggested rather pointedly that, if von Rad and Noth were to be believed, the texts told us far more about the period of their supposed composition—from the early years of the monarchy to the years immediately following the exile—than the period actually covered by the texts.

2. A rapidly growing number of scholars with an ear tuned to the literary features of the text²⁰ insisted that source criticism had seriously undermined confidence in the text in its final form. The-Bible-as-literature scholars mounted a full-scale challenge to such assumptions. For them the Bible was the work of skilled story tellers, and its readers were well advised to assume from the outset that the Bible as we have it comes to us from the hand of consummate artists. To assess the Pentateuch according to the canons of Western literature was somewhat blinkered, not to say patronisingly Eurocentric. It had long been sensed that the whole process of source analysis was going nowhere. As early as 1938 Gerhard von Rad had concluded that the 'profoundly disintegrating effect' of constantly dissecting the text and assigning its parts to their constitutive sources had

¹⁸ Noth claimed that Deuteronomy is not part of the Pentateuch. In fact it is not a Pentateuch but a Tetrateuch, ending with Numbers which provides frequent references to the fulfilment of the patriarchal promises of the gift of the promised land (chaps 32–35). Deuteronomy belongs with the Deuteronomistic History.

¹⁹ Biblical archaeologist and leading Old Testament scholar in the USA between 1930 and 1950, William Foxwell Albright, followed by his students such as George Ernest Wright, John Bright, David Noel Freedman and Frank Moore Cross, sought to reclaim the historicity of Israel's early period through close attention to linguistics and epigraphical evidence.

²⁰ Those associated with this movement include James Muilenberg, Robert Alter, Michael Fishbane, J P Fokkelman, Robert Polzin, Meir Sternberg, David Jobling, Adele Berlin, Cheryl Exum, Danna Nolan Fewell, David Gunn, Phyllis Trible and Mieke Bal.

led scholars away from the text in its final form, adding that, 'so far as the analysis of source documents is concerned, there are signs that the road has come to a dead end' (1938:1).

3. Preoccupation with source criticism could well lead to the sense that it was futile studying the text in its final form. Why study the canonical text, source criticism seemed to imply, when successive periods of heavy redactional work had led to duplications and discrepancies, diverse writing styles and a jumble of theological perspectives? Surely it would be better to isolate and study the original sources of the Pentateuch. That is where one found consistent terminology, literary coherence and a unified theological perspective. The editor's red pen had robbed the text of its pristine purity. The only people capable of studying the text with integrity are those who have first carefully noted the expert findings of the source critics, for the lay person a tall order at best, at worst a highly elitist proposition.

4. Then there is source criticism's basic logical fallacy, the fallacy of the circular argument whereby the proposition that has to be proved is already implied in the premise. To argue that the existence of continuous parallel documents, each giving a distinctive account of Israel's history up to the settlement in Canaan, can be proved by identifying and isolating text segments that exhibit distinctive vocabulary and theological themes which are in turn associated with a specific historical period, is to make an argument that lacks an independently verifiable premise. It is like building castles in mid-air.

5. With the exception of the Diatesseron, Tatian's second century AD harmony of the four gospels, no parallels have been found in the ancient world for the kind of conflation of literary sources that is implied by the documentary hypothesis.

6. Different words for the same entity, even different names for God, may be accounted for by the writer's desire to vary terminology. Cassuto says that Elohim is used when God is referred to as the creator God, the all-wise and all-powerful God of the nations, whereas Yahweh is the term reserved for God in his covenant relationship with Israel (1961: 31,32). As for the alleged contradictions in the Pentateuch, the Jewish scholar Robert Alter argues that 'we may still not fully understand what would have been perceived as real contradiction by an intelligent Hebrew writer of the Iron Age, so that apparently conflicting versions of the same event set side by side, far from troubling their original audience, may have sometimes been perfectly justified in a kind of logic we no longer apprehend' (1981: 20).

7. Many commentators detect the influence of Hegel in Wellhausen's conclusions regarding the history of Israelite religion. The primitive and more spontaneous cult, with its focus on family and village life, supposedly reflected in J and E, gave way to the moral absolutism of the pre-exilic prophets and the purified and centralised cult, reflected in D, which 'degenerated' into the remote, hierarchical and ritualistic cult of the post-exilic era, reflected in P and Ezra and Nehemiah.²¹

²¹ More recent assessments suggest that this is a caricature of Wellhausen's position. See the chapter on Wellhausen by John Barton in *Biblical interpretation*, by Robert Morgan and John Barton, Oxford University Press, 1988, pages 76–88.

8. The dominance of the documentary hypothesis has effectively marginalised the chief alternative accounts that have been given for the origins and formation of the Pentateuch, the supplementary and fragmentary hypotheses. The fragmentary hypothesis proposed that individual units (or fragments) such as narratives, legal codes, aetiologies, songs and covenant ceremonies were gathered together into larger story cycles, such as the primeval cycle, the various patriarchal story cycles, and the accounts of the exodus, Sinai and the wilderness wanderings. These blocks of tradition, built up from earlier fragments, developed independently of one another and were combined only at the final stage of the Pentateuch's redaction. The supplementary hypothesis, on the other hand, accounted for the Pentateuch's inconsistencies and repetitions by proposing that a basic text of the Pentateuch (a *Grundschrift*) was supplemented by additional material at different times throughout Israel's history, up to and including the Babylonian exile. The upheaval in Pentateuchal research in recent decades has breathed new life into each of these alternative scenarios.

Four major proposals

Since the 1970s, the discussion has drifted far and wide, but four major turns that it has taken deserve comment. One path commonly taken consists of firm adherence to the traditional source hypothesis with little variation. For example, Richard Elliott Friedman (2005) claimed that he could identify the following sources: J, E, JE redaction, P, D and R, where R stands for the final redaction of the Pentateuch and the JE redaction for a strand in which J and E have been edited together. Taking a piece from Exodus, Friedman has even taken the trouble to print the sources in different colours: J in green, E in red, and P in blue.²² Friedman said that each source that he had isolated read as a connected narrative when read on its own.

A major new turn in the road was taken by Heidelberg scholar Rolf Rendtorff (1977), who said that von Rad and Noth sought to achieve the impossible by holding together source and tradition criticism. He was adamant that the two methodologies were mutually exclusive. With its focus only on the middle phase in the development of the Pentateuchal literature, source criticism completely failed to account either for the initial stage or for the final stage in the formation of the corpus; that is, the smallest literary units that arose in community settings and the final stitching together of the sources. Source analysis lacked a beginning and an end. Tradition criticism, on the other hand, was concerned to see the process through from start to finish. Rendtorff reverted to Noth's proposal, but with a major variation. He agreed that Israel's earliest traditions gave rise to five separate blocks of material: the primeval history, the patriarchal stories, the exodus narrative, the covenant at Mt Sinai, the sojourn in the wilderness, and the settlement in the land. But rather than elements of the alleged sources (J,E,D,P) being represented in each of these blocks, the five basic building blocks of the Pentateuch arose independently of each other, each held together by its own distinct theological perspective. In other words, different theological stances weren't to be traced to the sources that supposedly

²² 'Taking the biblical text apart', *Bible Review* 24/4 (2005), 19–23, 48–50.

straddled the whole of the Pentateuch; rather, the Pentateuch's five blocks of discrete materials all had their own unique theological theme with terminology pertinent to that theme. For example, the patriarchal stories were held together by the divine promises of offspring, land, blessing and guidance. As the material was transmitted generation to generation, the promises were made to apply not simply to Abraham but also to his progeny. A Deuteronomic editor during the exile was then said to have combined the five major units into the Pentateuch.²³

The growing consensus that the Pentateuch was finally formed only during or after the exile gave rise to another unprecedented development in the discussion. Previously, parallels with the great national Greek epics composed by historians like Herodotus and Thucydides had been excluded on the grounds that the Pentateuchal sources predated the Greek histories by several centuries. But the late dating for the Pentateuch gave fresh impetus to the notion. Come the moment, come the man. John Van Seters (1975, 1992, 1999) said the Pentateuch was the free composition of a fifth century Israelite historian, whom he called the Yahwist (J). It bore an uncanny resemblance, he said, to the works of the Greek historians. Each consisted of a rich mixture of traditional material that the writer had at his disposal, much of it of very recent origin. Other portions were free compositions of the author's own devising. Rather than betraying signs that separate sources had been fashioned into one major corpus, such features as an uneven writing style, long digressions, frequent repetitions, and connecting phrases such as 'some time later' were no more than stylistic devices typical of grand national epics written at that time, in different locations with different purposes.

Whereas Rendtorff spoke of a final Deuteronomic redaction of the Pentateuch, and Van Seters still clung to the notion of a J author, even speaking of early and late J elements and a final P redaction, Roger Norman Whybray (1987) picked up and ran with the notion of a fifth century historian as the sole author of the Pentateuch. His author was an individual fully versed in the standard historiography of his day, with no interest whatsoever in smoothing out inconsistencies, contradictions or repetitions. They were his stock in trade; that was how grand narratives were written in those days. As far as Whybray was concerned, it was unnecessary to speak of separate documents and redactional stages when accounting for the formation of the Pentateuch.

Concluding reflections

Few hold to an E source any longer. Where the Yahwist remains, he has been moved from the time of Solomon in the tenth century (von Rad) to the period of the exile (Van Seters), where he no longer represents one of the four sources, as a major theologian, but he has become an historian who compiled the whole of the Pentateuch, drawing on a host of fragments from earlier traditions. If any approach can be said to have gained a foothold in the field, however tenuous, it would be the approach of people like Rendtorff

²³ Rendtorff's proposals are extensively reviewed in the July 1977 issue of the *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*.

and his students who have pursued a course whose impetus came from Gunkel but which was developed by von Rad and Noth, the history of traditions approach. Rendtorff has taken the next step, and there is mounting evidence that many in the field agree with his opinion that source and tradition criticism are mutually exclusive, and in the final analysis source criticism must be rejected as the way of accounting for the formation of the Pentateuch.²⁴ The Pentateuch was built up from the smallest narrative units, forming into blocks of tradition that arose in total independence of each other, which were in turn edited into a unified whole at the time of the exile. Others, like Whybray, have pursued the process further and have come to what they would regard as its logical conclusion. Whybray has no qualms about saying farewell not only to the Yahwist, but also to the Elohist and the Priestly writer. Nor does he believe he has been shown sufficient evidence of the five major tradition blocks that allegedly preceded the final product, the canonical Pentateuch.

At the international conference of the Society of Biblical Literature held in Edinburgh in July 2006, David Clines of Sheffield spoke of the subordination of rational debate to power when it comes to creating and maintaining world views and grand theories.²⁵ With reference to the documentary hypothesis, Clines said there was the power of leading persons and prominent institutions, and the inherent power of theories that seem to be comprehensive enough to integrate and explain a vast array of otherwise disparate and incomprehensible data. When such a paradigm has taken hold it accrues to itself the power to draw the practitioners in the field under its sway, to the extent that those who refuse to succumb to its magnetic attraction are regarded as heretics and risk ostracism within the relevant scholarly community.

When any potent paradigm is shaken to the foundations, as with the documentary hypothesis, one can witness one or more of the following reactions. Most will cling tenaciously to the old paradigm, struggling to retain it, perhaps adjusting it slightly in a defensive reaction to the onslaught. If the weaknesses in the paradigm that have been identified cannot be fixed, the failure may be explained simply as a result of the field's lack of the resources to solve the issue for the time being, so it is shelved for a future generation with more developed tools. Thirdly, a candidate for a totally new paradigm may arise, to challenge its predecessor, and the community in question is thrust into the midst of a war of contending paradigms, the clever young upstart against the elderly and embattled incumbent.

Things are slightly different, however, in the case of the documentary hypothesis, Clines said, in that a serious challenger has not yet arisen. Too many alternative hypotheses have sprung up, and none has drawn to itself the broadly-based explanatory force of Wellhausen's proposal, or the required body of adherents. In that situation, the quest for origins will undoubtedly continue as a minor and marginal part of scholarly endeavour in

²⁴ See the essays in Dozeman and Schmid (2006).

²⁵ His presentation was a response to a paper by Rolf Rendtorff that was presented the same evening of the conference: 'What happened to the Yahwist? Reflections after thirty years'. The sentiments that follow restate and react to what Clines said that evening.

relation to the Old Testament, with the high likelihood that no grand theory of origins will ever arise to match Wellhausen and his countless followers.

However elusive the truth may be concerning the origins of the Pentateuch, it is generally agreed that there is a truth concerning its origins, and the quest will remain a legitimate pursuit among biblical scholars. On the other hand, Clines contended, the last thirty years have made it clear that the quest is not particularly important, or valuable. Of far greater importance are such matters as the ideology, the theology and the literary character of the texts. Therefore the quest for origins does not deserve the prominence it has enjoyed; in fact, it ought to be shunted further and further out to the margins of the discipline. Meanwhile, in most parts of the world the field has voted with its feet. Rather than landing a knockout blow on the chin of the age-old theory, most students of the Old Testament have simply stepped out of the ring and moved on, to pursue their interests in totally different areas, such as the ideology of the text, theology, ethics, or narrative and rhetorical analyses.

A couple of caveats are in place. First, if the question of textual origins is ignored completely, the ever-present temptation in some quarters to resort to Mosaic authorship to account for the Pentateuch's origins quickly resurfaces. Secondly, when the stress falls exclusively on 'the text as it stands' and 'the text in its final form', the gains of kerygmatic theology (exemplified by people such as Gerhard von Rad, Hans Walter Wolff, Terence Fretheim and Walter Brueggemann) are readily lost. Kerygmatic theology has a lively sense that the Bible consists largely of the utterances of God's chosen mouthpieces who speak God's word into living communities of faith at times of specific pastoral and theological challenge in their life before God. One of the major concerns of source theory, in the hands of kerygmatic theologians, has been to try to identify such moments in the life of ancient Israel, and the specific word of the Lord that was being spoken into such a situation. As speculative and inconclusive as such scholarly endeavours may be, they serve to remind (prospective) preachers and teachers of their never-ceasing kerygmatic calling. We should exercise a degree of caution, therefore, when we feel tempted to bid farewell to the Yahwist for good.

References

- Alter, Robert, 1981. *The art of biblical narrative*, Basic Books, New York.
- Blenkinsopp, Joseph, 1992. *The Pentateuch: an introduction to the first five books of the Bible*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library, Doubleday, New York.
- Brueggemann, Walter, and Hans Walter Wolff, 1982. *The vitality of Old Testament traditions*, second edition, John Knox Press, Atlanta.
- Cassuto, Umberto, 1961. *The documentary hypothesis and the composition of the Pentateuch*, Magnes Press, Hebrew University, Jerusalem.
- Dozeman, Thomas B, and Konrad Schmid, eds, 2006. *A farewell to the Yahwist? The*

composition of the Pentateuch in recent European interpretation, SBL Symposium Series 34, Atlanta, Georgia.

Friedman, Richard Elliott, 1987. *Who wrote the Bible?* Harper & Row, New York.

———, 2005. 'Taking the biblical text apart', *Bible Review* 24/4, 19–23, 48–50.

Noth, Martin, 1981 (1943). *The Deuteronomistic History*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield (*Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien*, 1943).

Rendtorff, Rolf, 1977. *The problem of the process of transmission in the Pentateuch*, translated by John J Scullion (*Das überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch*), JSOTS 89, JSOT Press, Sheffield.

Rudolph, Wilhelm, 1938. *Der 'Elohist' von Exodus bis Josua*, BZAW 68.

Schmid, Hans H, (1976). *Der sogenannte Yahwist*. Reviewed by G J Wenham, in JSOT 3 (1977), 57–60.

Van Seters, John, 1975. *Abraham in history and tradition*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London.

———, 1992. *Prologue to history: the Yahwist as historian in Genesis*, Westminster/John Knox, Louisville.

———, 1999. *The Pentateuch: a social-science commentary*, Trajectories series, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield.

Volz, Paul, and Wilhelm Rudolph, 1938. *Der Elohist als Erzähler: ein Irrweg der Pentateuchkritik?* BZAW 63.

von Rad, Gerhard, 1938. 'The form-critical problem of the Hexateuch', in *The problem of the Hexateuch and other essays* (translated by E W Trueman Dicken from *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament*), McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1968, pages 1–78.

Wellhausen, Julius, 1983 (1883). *Prolegomena to the history of ancient Israel*, Peter Smith, Gloucester, Massachusetts.

Whybray, Roger Norman, 1987 (1994). *The making of the Pentateuch: a methodological study*, JSOT Press, Sheffield.